

MICHAEL ARLEN IN RETIREMENT

Posted on November 10, 2022 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



By Alec Waugh

The King Cole room in the St. Regis Hotel, New York, is open at lunchtime to men only. On most days of the week during the early 1950s the table on the left of the desk was occupied by a small thin man in his later fifties, with a short clipped moustache and closely cut hair that was turning grey. He wore a dark suit that had been cut for him in Savile Row, a stiff white collar with a plain silk or satin tie and a pearl pin. He had a Continental air.

He arrived at a quarter to one, alone. He would order a dry martini and light a cigarette which he smoked through a long holder; four places were laid at his table, and by the time he was half-way through his martini, one or two of those places would have been filled. His table was a club where each man paid for his own drinks and food, and his friends rang up a day or so before to ask if their presence would be convenient. If no one had rung up by ten o'clock he would take steps to assure that he would not lunch alone. He did not need to often; he had a large acquaintance. There was constant laughter at his table. He was a good listener, who could appreciate good talk, but the loudest laughter came when he himself was talking.

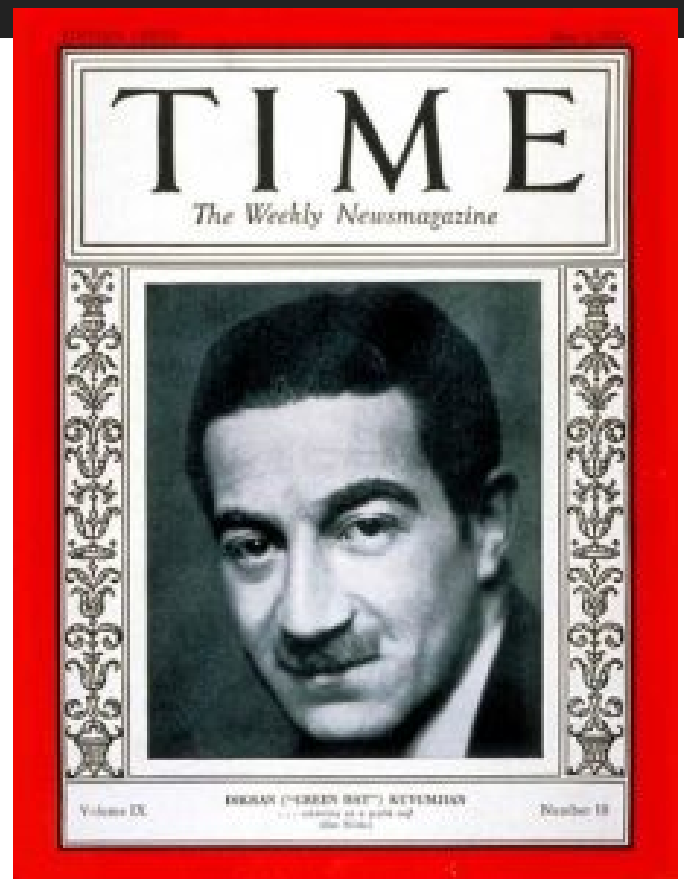
A few years earlier as a result of a motor accident he had been forced to carry a walking stick and as he told a story, he would lean forward on it. When he was a very young man, the first Lord Birkenhead gave him this advice on public speaking: "If your hands are right, everything will be all right. Get a chair or table in front of you and hold on to it." He now used his walking stick as a lectern and gesticulated with his cigarette holder. You were reminded of those oriental tale -teller of the market place, whose hands were as eloquent as their voices.

He ordinarily took three martinis before he ordered lunch. Half past one became half past two. The room was now almost empty. Quite often at about quarter to three, a waiter would whisper, "Your wife's outside, sir." She was small, neat, and dark, with a short, pointed, aristocratic nose. She too had a foreign air. She had looked in on her way to her hairdresser to ask if anything had happened during lunch to change the plans that they had made that morning. He would talk to her for a couple of minutes and return to his table. A newcomer to the King Cole Room would think, "That must be somebody."

The newcomer would be right. It was Michael Arlen. And the story of the long journey that had brought him to that corner table in the King Cole Room is as romantic as any of those which brought him fame and fortune in the 1920s.

I met him for the first time in 1920. Heinemann was then advertising a book by an unknown writer with a quote from the Daily Express: "All reading London is guessing at the authorship of a slim book

entitled *The London Venture*. Some clever people think that George Moore has recovered his dead youth in this extraordinary little volume, half essay, half novel wholly delightful." Reviewing it in *John O'London's Weekly* I gave my reason for not believing that it was by George Moore. A few days later W.L. George, at an afternoon party, brought up to me a quietly but exceptionally well-dressed young man. "It's as well," George said, "that you didn't try to pretend there was no such person as Michael Arlen because here he is." George amplified his introduction. Arlen, he said was an Armenian born in Bulgaria and christened Dikran Kouyoumdjian who had prudently rid himself of a name no bookseller could pronounce.



Of the first meeting I can recall one thing only, but it was symptomatic. George showed me a copy of *The London Venture* that Arlen had inscribed on the title-page "Per ardua ad astrakhan". From the start Arlen knew whither he was bound.

Four years later *The Green Hat* was a top-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Subtitled "A Romance for a Few People," written in a highly mannered, almost precious style, peppered with allusions that the general reader could scarcely catch, it was presented to the public as belles lettres rather than a novel in the genre of Max Beerbohm and George Moore; yet it caught the public fancy like a dance tune.

Today, forty years later, it is easy to see why it did. It was set in the post-war London of fast cars and expensive night clubs, and its heroine, Iris Storm—a woman with "a pagan body with a Chislehurst mind" (perhaps "Boston" is the nearest American equivalent for that), star-crossed in her first love by a parent's intervention—stayed faithful to that love "in her fashion".

"What I said at eighteen is true now at thirty. I have never said I loved him to any man but Napier for it hasn't been true. I have given myself in disdain, in desire, with disgust, with delight, but I have kept to that silly childish boast of mine."

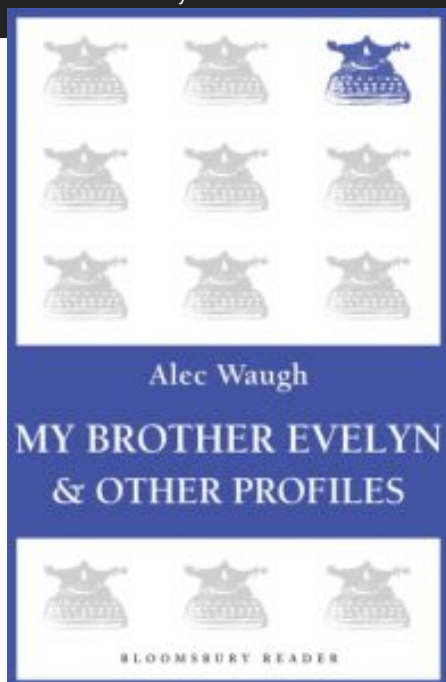
In *The Green hat* Michael Arlen was the spokesman of a new type of woman who was demanding a

man's right to live her life in the way she chose. Several recent books—*The Far Side of Paradise*, for example—have accepted Iris Storm as a symbol of the 1920s. And in telling her story Arlen was also the spokesman of a disenchanted generation that after four years of the trenches was eager to welcome extravagance, frivolity, and display.

The story is told in the first person, with the narrator constantly in the centre of the stage, so that the personality of the author was an essential ingredient in the book's success. Every discussion of *The Green Hat* became a discussion of Michael Arlen.

His Armenian birth gave him an air of mystery. He rarely lifted the curtain on that foreign background, even to interviewers. Only once, in *Confession of a Naturalized Englishman*, which appeared in his collection of short stories *Babes in the Wood*, was he autobiographical. In that story he told how he was brought to England at the age of five, and spent his boyhood in Southport, where there is a large Armenian colony. For three years he was "instructed in team work and pulling together at Malvern College in Worcestershire", a school that is famous for its cricketers. At the age of seventeen he came to London on a weekly allowance of 2 pounds.

That was in 1913. A year later the outbreak of war made his position difficult. He had no legal status. Bulgaria had disowned him because he would not serve as a conscript in her army. Bulgaria was an ally of Germany, so he could not become naturalized British subject during the war, nor could he change his name. As he was not eligible for military service, his lot was cast among those who for reasons of health, age, or political opinions were non-combatants. He was befriended by Orage, the editor of the *New Age*, a paper which rewarded its contributors parsimoniously. He made friends with Aldous Huxley, who was debarred from service by his eyesight: with D.H. Lawrence whose German wife was under police surveillance and whose *The Rainbow* had recently been suppressed



by the public prosecutor, and with Nancy Cunard, who was then, as she has been so often since, in conflict with her day. He was one of the patrons of the White Tower restaurant in Percy Street, whose proprietor Stulic, a Viennese by birth, was also under police surveillance.

As far as I know none of his friends of this period have written of him in their autobiographies, but there is an illuminating passage in a letter that D. H. Lawrence wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell in December 1915:

Kouyoumdjian seems a bit blatant and pushing: you may be put off by him. But this is because he is very foreign, even though he doesn't know it himself. In English life he is in a strange alien medium and he can't adjust himself. But I find the core of him very good. One must be patient with his jarring manner and listen to the sound decency that is in him.

He saw the world, as a foreigner, with dazzled eyes. D.H. Lawrence shrugged when Arlen asked him his advice. "I am a realist," he said, "You are a romanticist. You have your own way to make. I cannot guide you."

Arlen wrote vividly but colloquially, with unusual inversions and inflections, with a heightened exotic pitch. "The moon made a great fuss of her all the way to a place called great Neck. They had quite a party the moon and Marilyn. I left out had nothing to do but watch."

That was what they called "Arlenese." He did not so much tell a story as embroider one. Fascinated by the world of fashion, he conveyed his sense of wonderment to his readers. Before I began to write this essay, I re-read *The Green Hat*. It is a period piece, but though it is dated, it is not *démodé*. The magic is still there.

His first novel was called *Piracy* and his capture of the British and American public was an act of piracy that he carried off flamboyantly.

He wrote exclusively of the upper classes—"I decided," he said, "to write about my betters who in England are much easier to approach and understand than labourers'—but he was not in any sense a snob.

For me, Arlen had at that time the fascination of a Balzac character. "What do you want of life?" Vautrin asked Rubempre. "To be famous and to be loved," Rubempre answered. Arlen would have given the same reply. He was short, he dressed quietly, he never wore loud checks or startling ties, yet he was a prominent figure in any gathering. There was a gloss about him. Years later, he was to say in an interview to Geoffrey Hellman: "My mother taught me to think a distressed area should make the best of itself." Even when he was poor he never looked poor.

He was the constant object of conjecture. The gossip columns were dotted with references to the table that was reserved for him in the Embassy Club each night; to his yellow Rolls-Royce, which he had registered in Manchester so that its number plates would carry the letter MA; to the money he had invested in Noel Coward's *The Vortex*. He is the Michaelis of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and report credited him with a dramatic succession of romances.

Comments



Jirair – 2022-11-12 18:19:01

Arlen is an uncommon name. It's not difficult to assume that Dikran Demirdjian picked the name deliberately because there's only one letter difference between Arlen and Armen.



Hayorti – 2022-11-10 14:06:34

"The Flying Dutchman" is the mythological story of a ship which roams the seven seas but never finds a port of call. I believe the last book Michael Arlen wrote was titled "The Flying Dutchman". I haven't read the book but the ship's myth can be a metaphor for Arlen's life. An Armenian born in Bulgaria, he was raised and educated in Britain. When he became a famous and rich author, he moved to the Riviera. A few years later he was back in Britain where he had tax problems in addition to racial discrimination. He then moved to the United States to work in Hollywood. But now he faced immigration problems. He stopped writing. He died in 1956.